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Obama in Netanyahu's Web

By ROGER COHEN

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NEW YORK — Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, won the first round over President Barack Obama. That's not good for American interests or for Israel's long-term security.

All the overblown reciprocal compliments could not hide evident tensions — over Iran and Israel-Palestine and how the two are linked. In the end, Obama blinked.

The president ceded to Israeli pressure for a timetable on any Iran talks, saying a “reassessment” should be possible by year's end (Israel had pressed for an October deadline). Obama talked of the possibility of “much stronger international sanctions” against Iran, undermining his groundbreaking earlier overture that included a core truth: “This process will not be advanced by threats.”

Obama also allowed Netanyahu to compliment him for “leaving all options on the table” — the standard formula for a possible U.S. military strike against Iran — when he said nothing of the sort. The president did, however, use that tired phrase in a Newsweek interview this month — another mistake given the unthinkable consequences of a third U.S. war front in the Muslim world.

In return, what did Obama get? Not even acknowledgment from Netanyahu that Palestinian statehood, rather than some form of eternal limbo, is the notional goal of negotiations.

Score one for Netanyahu, who, in the words of one former American official who knows him well, “is the kind of guy who negotiates the time he will go to the bathroom.”

It’s time to get real, and a several-kiloton nuclear blast in North Korea has helped. The test is a reminder that while the worst has already happened in Kim Jong-il’s isolated state, it has not yet happened in Iran and is still avoidable if determined and creative policies are pursued. This, however, will require that Obama replace the make-nice noises of a former community organizer with strategic backbone.

Three things are clear. The first is that if Obama allows the Israeli agenda on Iran to become America’s, his outreach is dead. I don’t know if Israel is bluffing about bombing Iran — nobody does — but one thing is clear: Netanyahu’s bellicosity is as unrelenting as his desire to distract attention from stillborn Palestine.

Netanyahu, declaring “It is us or no one,” said this week that his job was to “eliminate” Iran’s threat. Israel’s shifting “red line” on Iran, now avowedly months away, is at odds with U.S. intelligence, which holds that no Iranian decision on bomb production has been made and capacity is likely two to five years distant.

It’s essential that Obama cleave to an American framework that affords the time to overcome a 30-year impasse. He might remind Netanyahu that if anyone had asked five years ago if an Iran with 6,000 centrifuges, more than a ton of low-enriched uranium and a genie-out-the-bottle level of technical nuclear know-how was over Israel’s “red line,” the answer would have been, “Damn right.”

But the world has not come to an end, for all Netanyahu’s dangerous, mythologizing attempts to liken Iran to Amalek, the Biblical enemy of the Jews that the Israelites were told to destroy, every “man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”

The second imperative is that the sanctions game be revealed for an empty farce. There will be no “crippling sanctions” — Hillary Clinton’s phrase — because China and Russia have their own interests in Iran.

Beijing has paid lip service to mild sanctions while becoming Iran’s largest trading partner in recent years: Tehran is awash in Chinese products. Moscow has trained Iranian engineers while calculating how Iran can serve its aim of a less U.S.-dominated world.

A race is on for Iran, with its vast oil and gas reserves. China and Russia will be front and center.

Only a U.S. blockade would have impact — but that’s an act of war. Tightened sanctions equal a return to the sterile policies of the Bush years. They would prove no more effective than in North Korea.

The third imperative is for Obama to shift from what Nader Mousavizadeh of the International Institute for Strategic Studies recently called a “mix of rhetorical innovation and policy continuation” to new thinking on Iran freed of carrot-and-stick redundancy.

This must begin with Iran's pride and insecurities — a medium-sized power facing the world's superpower — and almost certainly envision as an endgame a “non-zero option” where Iran retains an intrusively monitored, limited pilot uranium enrichment program while jettisoning its unacceptable rhetoric and troublemaking to become part of a new regional security arrangement.

Netanyahu talks a lot about the “existential threat” from Iran. The United States faces a prosaic daily threat: Many more young American men and women will die in Iraq and Afghanistan over the next several years if no Iranian breakthrough is achieved.

Obama must remind Israel of that. He should also tell Bibi that the real existential threat to Israel is not Amalek but hubris: An attack on Iran that would put the Jewish state at war with Persians as well as Arabs, undermine its core U.S. alliance, and set Tehran on a full-throttle course to a nuclear bomb with the support of some 1.2 billion Muslims.